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Creating a Harmonious Society

Editorial

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Editorial

Under Hu Jintao, Chinese authorities have made the building of a “harmonious society” a priority. This was reiterated at the 17th Communist Party Congress in October 2007, although it was another term, “scientific development” (*kexue fazhanguan*) that eventually appeared in the amendments to the Party’s constitution. In any case, behind the variety of slogans, the basic orientations remain intact. In view of all the fault lines China now confronts, priority is given to a development path of higher quality and sustainability, more evenly spread and better managed. Behind the scenes, the challenge for the authorities is also to continue devising policies that will help them adapt to changes they have themselves ushered in but which could nevertheless weaken their hold on power. Thus, at the current juncture, “harmony” is also essential for a Party concerned over retaining its grip on the country.

This collection of articles is intended as a reflection on major issues raised by the effort to build a harmonious society. The first section deals with issues of a political nature, and evokes contrasting responses. An extensive overview of the situation in China today starts off with Willy Wo-Lap Lam asking whether it is at all possible to realise the objectives set in the absence of genuine political reforms allowing the weaker sections of the population to defend their interests against the groups grabbing the nation’s wealth. On a different level, citizens’ political participation is also at the heart of the contribution by Gunter Schubert and Chen Xuelian, who examine village elections, showing these could have a positive effect in terms of social stability and local governance and even boost the regime’s legitimacy. The situation in rural China is far from homogenous. Yu Jianrong, doing field work in Hunan on a farmers’ resistance movement, analyses how they invoke higher norms and moral values in defence of their rights. The “norms of Chinese harmony” are also explored by Leïla Choukroune and Antoine Garapon in defending the idea that in China today law is a disciplining and moralising tool used to ensure the regime’s durability. The theme of morality, as also the often Confucian-sounding official slogans - harmony is a good example - lead to the question of the authorities’ attitude towards Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism. Sébastien Billioud analyses the phenomenon in official discourses and places it in the context of larger social changes. Sebastian Veg’s inquiry into another form of achieving harmony - censoring books and films - closes the political section of the collection.

While the quest for qualitative development, in social and environmental matters notably, is often projected as a new prioritization pushing growth imperatives to a lower rung, a strong economy nevertheless remains the key to a harmonious society. Andy Rothman gives his reading of the debates that have no doubt taken place on this theme within the Party and explains what harmony would mean in concrete terms for the economy and investors. Guillaume Giroir, for his part, looks into the social and territorial fault lines in China and possible changes in them, and wonders to what extent the ideal of a harmonious society is compatible with a market economy. These fault lines are also on Athar Hussain’s mind as he looks at the creation of a social security system covering the whole population, both urban and rural, by 2020. It is an ambitious goal and time is short. Nevertheless, while the achievement of a fully operating system seems rather improbable, some initial conditions already seem to be in place. Sarah Cook analyses the challenge China faces, especially in the countryside, in turning health into a basic right. Another major social issue, also characterized by disparities, is that of education. Wang Chunguang’s study paints a bleak picture of the education system, affording little cause for optimism at present. The collection ends with an article by Bonny Ling, Wing Lam, Elisabeth Wickeri and Tina Tan that spotlights key players in this harmonious society, namely non-governmental organisations, analysing the rules governing their work and the difficulties they face.

This issue marks a major milestone for *China Perspectives* as it is the 100th of the French edition. We hope it meets your expectations and thank you for being loyal readers. •

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